

ABRAHAM HALL <sup>Worship</sup>  
7612 Old ~~Murkirk~~ Road  
Beltsville  
Prince George's County  
Maryland

HABS NO. MD-1043

HABS  
MD  
17-BELTV,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS AND  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ABRAHAM HALL

HABS NO. MD-1043

Location: 7612 Old Muirkirk Road, Beltsville, Prince George's County, Maryland

Significance: Built for the Benevolent Sons and Daughters of Abraham, this is a rare example of a late nineteenth-century benevolent society hall, the most outstanding example in the county. It was the focal point of the developing black community of farmers, and workers from the nearby Muirkirk Iron Furnace.

Description: This is a two-story, three-bay-by-two-bay frame structure with a gable-front roof. There is a small, single-story, one-bay deep, gable-front section along the southwest front and northwest side. Running the length of the northeast rear is a one-story, gable-front addition. The walls are covered with german siding, with cornerboards, and the foundation is of brick. The windows are two-over-two-light double-hung sash and have louvered shutters. The double-door entryway is to the center of the southwest front and is flanked by windows. There is a second doorway at the southeast side of the rear addition. The low-pitched gable roofs are covered with wood shingles, with the exception of the rear addition, which is covered with raised-seam metal. There is an interior brick chimney to the center of the northwest side.

The interior plan is basically one room up and one, down. The stairway, in the south corner, is a two-run stair enclosed at the bottom with narrow beaded-board partition walls. In the north corner is the kitchen, part of which forms the single-story section at the side of the main block. The rear addition was made to house a raised stage area. The walls have wainscoting, and the windows have symmetrically molded trim with bull's-eye corner blocks. The stairway leads to the open hall of the second floor. There is a built-in cabinet against the northwest wall, which was used to store ledgers and other records of the society.

History:

In an effort to help the newly emancipated black population become self-sufficient following the Civil War, Congress passed an act establishing the Freedman's Bureau, on March 3, 1865. Its mission was to organize schools and hospitals, provide rations of food and clothing, help secure employment, and protect civil rights. The Freedmen's Bureau (along with the northern benevolent societies who sent teachers) provided the primary means of assistance to newly freed blacks. Its work was carried out within the communities, through local lodges. One such lodge was Abraham Hall, located in the Rossville community of Vansville District.

There were small numbers of free blacks living in Prince George's County prior to the Civil War--1,096 countywide in 1820, and only 1,238 by 1860. From the early 19th century the Vansville District (in the northern section of the county) was among the areas of the county with the largest population of free blacks, along with Aquasco, Queen Anne and Piscataway (Floyd, 21). This was probably due to the rare opportunity for employment for blacks in a field other than agriculture, offered at the Muirkirk Iron Furnace. Some black communities began as small enclaves of rural shacks, generally located on less desirable lands. A few, such as Rossville, later developed into established black communities (Floyd, 20). It was these communities that would become the center for benevolent societies chartered by the Freedmen's Bureau.

The organization known as the Benevolent Sons and Daughters of Abraham, Rebecca Lodge #6, received their charter in 1877. Although chartered by the federal government and overseen by the Washington, D.C., headquarters, this was a grass-roots organization operated by the local "members." Membership in the society provided for financial assistance during emergencies, insurance otherwise unobtainable for blacks (Brown, 1).

In 1886, the members joined eleven black families in Rossville to purchase lots from

ABRAHAM HALL

HABS NO. MD-1043 (page 3)

the newly platted subdivision, formerly part of the Duvall estate. The next year they began construction on the current hall (as well as numerous residences in town). The hall was probably built by John W. Jackson, a contractor from nearby Laurel, to whom is attributed at least two other buildings in the community that year. It was completed in 1889 (Pearl).

Abraham Hall became the center of activities of all types in Rossville and the nearby black communities of Vansville and Muirkirk. In addition to providing aid, Abraham Hall was also the focal point of social events, and at times was used as a schoolhouse and a church. For over twenty-five years the hall served as the school for the children of Rossville and Muirkirk. When a fire destroyed the community church, Queen's Chapel, the congregation met instead at Abraham Hall. The church's annual camp meetings were also held here. In the 1950s, the first teen club meetings were held here and in the early 1970s, it served as a union hall and Job Corps center (interview with Brown & Jones).

Last used in the late 1970s, Abraham Hall fell into disrepair. As an outgrowth of the Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission History Division's Black History Program, came a bond bill creating a restoration fund for black history sites, in 1986. As a rare surviving example of the benevolent societies that flourished throughout the county during the later 19th-century, Abraham Hall was the first recipient (it is the best of two extant). Thus, along with assistance from the county and Maryland Historical Trust, it became the first African-American historic site in the county to undergo complete restoration. The descendants of those families responsible for the construction of Abraham Hall still look to it as the focal point of community activity (Brown, 5).

ABRAHAM HALL  
HABS NO. MD-1043 (page 4)

Sources:

Brown, Marsha L. "Abraham Hall: A New Beginning," Passport to the Past, Newsletter of the M-NCPPC, Vol. 02, No. 1, January/February 1991.

\_\_\_\_\_, interview with Ms. Sharon Brown and Mr. Jones of Rossville, with Catherine Lavoie, 4 April 1991.

Floyd, Bianca P. Records and Recollections: Early Black History in Prince George's County, Maryland. A publication of the Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission, Prince George's County, History Division, 1989.

Pearl, Susan G. Maryland Historical Trust, State Historic Sites Inventory Form, Rebecca Lodge #6 of the Benevolent Sons & Daughters of Abraham or Abraham Hall, prepared September 1986.

Virta, Alan. Prince George's County; A Pictorial History. Norfolk, Virginia: Donning Company Publishers, 1984.

Historian:

Catherine C. Lavoie  
Historic American Buildings Survey  
July 1991